

KOL NIDRE DRASH 5780
The Story of Our Time
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When asked the question, “Why did God create humanity?” Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (z”l) responded, “Because God loves stories.”

God and human beings love stories. Every era, every generation, has a story. Sometimes, those stories are grand adventures, with clear plot lines, obvious heroes and villains, and Hollywood happy endings.

Sometimes, those stories aren’t fairytales, but a magnum opus of anguish, human brutality, and devastation.

What is the story of our time?

The story of our time.

The story of our time is a gunman storming into Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, shouting for Jews to die, and murdering 11 people as they prayed on a Shabbes morning devoted to the plight of refugees.

The story of our time is a gunman storming into a Mosque in New Zealand, and methodically murdering 55 Muslims as they prayed their Juuma prayers.

The story of our time are gunmen storming into a Church in Sri Lanka, murdering dozens of Christians as they prayed to their savior.

This is the story of our time.

The story of our time is an epic moment of human history, where religious extremists across the planet are using the name of God to justify violence against people who believe differently than they do. The news each day has stories of people who claim to demonstrate their allegiance to God by assaulting God’s creation. That isn’t faith; that is blasphemy!

In America, we’ve seen attacks on synagogues, mosques, and churches escalate dramatically these past few years. The ADL, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the US Justice Department all report exponentially higher incidents of antisemitism, Islamophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, and xenophobia in the past three years.

There is no doubt that we are living in a polarizing, frightening moment of history.

This is the story of our time.

The story of our time is overwhelmed by despair, pained by craven and narcissistic right wing political leaders who worship at the altar of the NRA, who prostrate themselves to big pharma, who seek to divide white Jews from people of color (and thus placing Jews of color in an impossible quandry), men from women, gay from straight, humans from our planet.

This is a devastating story. But this is not the only story of our time.

The story of our time is the story of Shaine Claiborne, a progressive evangelical Christian, who so loves Jesus and the Bible, that he traverses the nation and invites people to bring their guns to church on Sunday morning, where following the Biblical verse from Isaiah, he literally melts their guns down turns their swords into plowshares.

The story of our time is young heroes like Greta Thunberg and Minnesota's own Isra Hirsi, demanding serious action on our climate crisis.

The story of our time is Malala Yousefzai working to ensure that every girl on the planet has a pencil and a book, because not all battles are fought with a sword.

The story of our time is our young leaders at Shir Tikvah, mobilizing with their peers across the nation, to stop gun violence and March for Our Lives.

The story of our time.

The story of our time asks epic moral questions of us today:

Given the world's tumult, given there is so much to legitimately frighten us, who will we be?

How will we respond to very real threats against us as a Jewish community?

What is the story of our time that we will tell?

We Jews must NEVER ignore the pain and suffering and hatred around us. But we must NEVER mirror it either.

For the Jewish people, this has been a frightening time; there are more incidents of antisemitism than at any point in my nearly 49 years of living. From toppled grave stones to antisemitic graffiti on synagogues to on-line harrassment of Jews to physical attacks on Jews in Brooklyn and in Pittsburgh and Poway, this is the most precarious time to be a Jew in the United States in my lifetime. There are legitimate reasons to be frightened.

Rabbi Shai Held teaches, "Faced with a situation that makes us stare the depth and extent of our vulnerability in the face, most of us want to flee. Here, then, is Judaism's message: You want to serve God? Run towards the very people and places you most want to run away from. You want to be religious? Learn to be present for other people when they are in pain. All the rest is commentary."

I'm attempting tonight to describe what I see going on in our world and to offer some reflections on how we might move forward. The backdrop of this conversation makes it sensitive, complicated, and tender: A candidate for US Senate in Minnesota spews antisemitic hatred by claiming the Israel lobby controls congress. A friend to many in this room, one of the first Muslim congresswomen, tweeted antisemitic tropes years ago, and earlier this year, seemed to make claims that Jews have dual loyalty and used antisemitic tropes of Jews and money in what was otherwise, a legitimate criticism of an Israel lobby organization.

As a rabbi, I must call out another important truth: the media do not pay nearly the attention to white male Christian candidates and elected officials who engage in antisemitism as they do a Hijabi-wearing Muslim refugee woman of color. I am **not** excusing either; I **am** calling into question why some antisemitism is deemed worthy of public attention while some does not seem newsworthy. It is painful when antisemitism comes from political opponents; it is painful and especially challenging when it comes from people who are our friends and allies in so many other arenas. And it is incumbent upon us as a Jewish community to take all these

claims seriously while simultaneously asking ourselves serious questions: Who benefits when some antisemitic acts receive the response of shrugging our shoulders when others seem to create alarm and hysteria by the media and the mainstream Jewish establishment? When it is young white men who are actually shooting Jews in synagogues, who benefits when the overwhelming majority of media coverage is of a Muslim woman of color and her Tweets? I do **not** excuse any antisemitic behavior. I **do** contend that we as a Jewish community need a more sophisticated analysis of the root causes of antisemitism and who is causing us the most real harm.

Antisemitism—the irrational fear and hatred of Jews—has existed for centuries, though the term itself less than 200 years old. There have been episodes where antisemitism was appreciably worse, such as the Spanish Inquisition when Jews were forced to convert to Christianity or be murdered; Czarist Russia; and, of course, the Shoah, the Holocaust. There have been times in the United States—most of the past three or four decades—when antisemitism occasionally reared its ugly head, but was *mostly* episodic and lived underground; there certainly were few structural or systemic antisemitic barriers for Jews to participate in American life. In the last few years, however, fueled in part by a white nationalist president who claims that Nazis are “fine people” and the rise of online chat groups such as Gab and 4chan which foment hatred, antisemitism is rising once again. It is the responsibility of each of us to work towards the eradication of antisemitism. But to eradicate something, we must admit that it exists. And that it is a real danger to Jews and our loved ones.

Together, let’s consider some seemingly contradictory truths tonight as we seek to tell a more complete, nuanced, and robust story of our time.

All antisemitism is bad. Not all antisemitism is the same. Not all criticism of the State of Israel is antisemitic. But some of it is. We Jews must take leadership to eradicate antisemitism. But we cannot and must not do it alone.

All Antisemitism is bad. It should go without saying that treating anyone badly because of who they are, what they believe, or how they pray is morally wrong. Treating Jews—or anyone else—badly for our religious commitments, is not only immoral, it should be considered unAmerican.

All Antisemitism is bad. Not all antisemitism is the same. There is a fundamental difference between Proud Boys (feh), StormFront, and white nationalists like Richard Spencer who marched passed the synagogue in Charlottesville with torches lit, chanting, “Jews will not replace us!” and someone who makes a stupid comment or sends out an offensive tweet. Let me be clear: It’s *all* bad. But we do a disservice to ourselves if we pretend it’s all the same. It just isn’t. We must be emotionally and morally agile enough to distinguish between what is unconscious or unkind from what is violent; from people who express antisemitism with malicious intent from those who do so from a place of ignorance. It does not excuse antisemitism when we differentiate the types and tropes that are expressed; it makes us stronger because we can discern who we can educate, who we are in relationship and coalition with, and who is actually a genuine threat seeking to do us harm.

Not all criticisms of Israel are antisemitic. Criticizing Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government for failing to end the occupation, for denying equal prayer rights at the Western Wall, for colluding with dictators across the globe, for engaging in racism against Arabs, and for denying African asylum seekers are all fair political criticisms. You may not agree with them, but they are in bounds for fair political critique. Public leaders receive public scrutiny over their policies and over their behavior. This is part of the responsibility of public leadership. Advocating for Palestinian human rights is not antisemitic and advocating for Israelis to live in peace and tranquility is not anti-Palestinian. We must never suggest that Jews who challenge antisemitism cannot also advocate for a democratic and Jewish Israel, even when that means we criticize the Israeli government. I have spent the last 30 years working for human rights for all the inhabitants of the land. It isn’t always easy; at times, it’s really murky and complicated, especially when we as Jews are implicated. We

need to be able to hold the paradoxical tension that Israel gives Jews sanctuary but in doing so, displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians; that the story we tell of Yom Ha-Atzma'ut-Israel's independence day-is a story and a day Palestinians call their Nakba-a catastrophe. Two radically different perspectives and stories of one historic moment. We are strong enough to hold the complexity this moment demands, to empathize with the pain and fear and aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians, to continue to call upon the Israeli government to serve as a beacon of hope and justice, to call upon the Palestinians and Israelis to denounce terrorism and seek peace, and to call in clearly and firmly the Israeli government when they do not live up to our highest Jewish ideals.

Not all criticisms of Israel are antisemitic. But some are. To proclaim that there is a Zionist conspiracy controlling the media is antisemitic. To claim that American Jews inherently have dual loyalties to Israel and the United States is antisemitic. To claim that Jews are conspiring to lead a genocide against white people and that Israel is responsible for the Ebola virus is factually wrong and antisemitic. We need to acknowledge antisemitism-even when it comes from people who are our allies and partners in so many other areas of our lives. As Rabbi Lekach-Rosenberg, Rabbi Rappaport, and I wrote in our pastoral letter to the congregation last spring, "We resist the instinct to shut down when we feel discomfort. We know it is easy to "call out" people when they do something wrong or offend us. It is harder—but vital—to "call in" said people, particularly those who are our allies in so many areas, with love and genuine commitment to work through the mess and the mistakes, to seek every opportunity to change, grow, and heal, to build a world of love and justice."

We Jews must take leadership to eradicate antisemitism. But we cannot and must not do it alone.

American Jews are not powerless victims. To pretend that we are is not an honest assessment of how the Jewish community has gained power and access in America. The President of the United States has Jewish children and grandchildren. There are Jews in the halls of congress and the Senate, as the heads of universities, non profits, progressive social movements and major corporations; in virtually every aspect of civic life and leadership there are Jews present.

At the same time, to deny the potent forces of white nationalism, to deny the reality that reported antisemitic acts are up substantially in the past few years, to deny that some candidates for office and elected officials traffic in antisemitism, would be utterly foolish. And factually wrong. We simultaneously have power as a community **and** we are vulnerable. As Carin Mrotz, Shir Tikvah leader, former board member, and Executive Director of Jewish Community Action taught us a few years ago, for white Jews, our whiteness is always conditional. We Jews are simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. And that makes this particular moment we are living through ever more vexing and complex.

We Jews must address antisemitism. But we cannot and must not do it alone. Isolation is deadly. Other communities are experiencing violence, too. We cannot become insular and isolated-that's what antisemites and white supremacists and Donald Trump want. Divided from one another, the consequences are devastating. The fallacy that Jews alone are responsible for eradicating antisemitism is as morally absurd as claiming that African Americans are solely responsible for eradicating racism and women for eradicating sexism and transpeople for eradicating transphobia. We cannot do this work alone; none of us. We must stay in relationship with each other, even when it is complicated, even when we have serious disagreements and issues to work out. We must call upon our progressive partners to actively address antisemitism in their midst just as we must confront the scourges of racism, sexism, Islamophobia, transphobia and the structures and systems that uphold and benefit from them. Just as we ask others to live up to their moral commitments, we must live up to our own.

Together, we must call ourselves in when we get it wrong. That is, after all, the purpose of Yom Kippur: to atone when we miss the mark.

I want to share a Facebook conversation I had a couple weeks ago with a Shir Tikvah member.

They wrote, "Rabbi, I have this great idea for your [Yom Kippur] sermon. Check it out. This is totally "hypothetical": a synagogue burns down in a Minnesota town and -- given the tension of the current political climate -- many people assume it is was caused by a Jew-hating white supremacist. Here's the twist. Are you ready? It turns out, it was accidentally started by a homeless man, who was seeking refuge in a sukkah built near the synagogue. Meshuggeneh, right?"

I responded, "Yep. Folks are so brittle right now, the fear is so palpable, that our first reactions are to assume the worst. It makes sense--our families have had our stories shaped in some powerful ways by antisemitism. So what do we do when those initial gut impulses are wrong? How do we continue to cultivate compassion even as we recognize that antisemitism still exists and Jews are simultaneously powerful *and* vulnerable...?"

Their reply: "I was so CERTAIN it was a neo-Nazi."

Me: "Same. And I hate that about the moment we are living in, that has left me so brittle..."

"But here's the thing: That is only part of the story of our time. First impressions aren't always right. Yes, we must trust our guts. And, when our guts are wrong, we must acknowledge it."

The story of our time is our ability to face the agony, the pain, the suffering, the grotesqueness of this moment and to steadfastly refuse to mirror it! Our task is to challenge antisemitism and cultivate a community of compassion, to work together to dismantle the systems of oppression, humiliation, and degradation that keep all of us from living into our most whole and holy selves; to work with everyone willing to champion human decency, to hold each other accountable with love and gentleness, to recognize the humanity in people even if they do not recognize it in us.

Jews in Torah are called *Ivrim*. It's a Hebrew word that means, "border crosser." **We are Ivrim: We are spiritual border crossers. The story of our time demands we stretch the borders and boundaries of our moral imagination. The story of our time demands nothing less of us.**

Our responses to the rising hatreds and animus of our time require our nuance, thoughtfulness, strategy, courage, and empathy. And our responses must be varied: No one way will be right for every situation.

What is the story of our time?

The story of our time is Muslims and Jews consoling each other after massacres in our houses of worship. But that is not enough! As my beloved friend and chevruta, Rabbi Lisa Grushcow teaches, "To meet at the funeral is too late. And so, when Muslims, the descendants of Ishmael, came to the Jewish community vigil after the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre; when Jews, the descendants of Isaac, came to make a ring of peace around a... mosque after the mosque massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, we said to one another with sadness: **We have to stop meeting this way.**"

We have to stop meeting this way! The story of our time must be about coming together and joining one another in the work of building a world worthy of our children's dreams.

The story of our time is young Jewish leaders getting arrested blocking ICE deportations-because we know our history, we know the Pharaohs we've confronted in the past, we know the dangers of tyranny and dehumanization.

The story of our time is synagogues and churches and mosques standing up for sanctuary and immigrants.

And the story of our time is our collective moral activism to dismantle the white supremacist systems and structures which cause such us all harm as we seek to offer a new vision-a new world that we have not yet created-where all of us live with gentleness and dignity. Our prophetic vision of the lion lying down with the lamb, of every human sitting beneath their vine and fig tree without fear, is a universal vision for all humanity.

The story of our time is one of creativity and possibility.

It is a story of global tumult and change.

It is a story of the final gasps of white nationalists.

It is the story of Matthew Stevenson and Derek Black, an Orthodox Jew and a former white nationalist who became friends over a Shabbes dinner table.

It is the story of Shaine Claiborne who beats guns into plowshares on his pulpit.

The story of our time is a progressive Catholic church welcoming a synagogue community into their building so we Jews can celebrate our new year.

The story of our time is a clarion call to strengthen our muscles of compassion, rational thought, and critical discernment, even when we are rightfully afraid.

What is the story of our time?

The story of our time is Matthew.

The man who admitted to starting the fire that destroyed Adas Israel Congregation in Duluth is named Matthew James Amiot. He's 36 years old and has spent several years living in and out of shelters for those experiencing homelessness and episodes of painful mental illness. It was a cold night and Matthew started a small fire to stay warm. He was in the shul's sukkah--the temporary structure we Jews build to remind us of the harvest, that life is fragile and temporary, to recall the days when we ourselves wandered, homeless, often desperate, fleeing Pharaohs and tyrants, Czars and Kaisers who sought us harm.

When the fire got out of control, Matthew tried to spit on it to put it out. But it was too late. He panicked and fled. He claims he was just a cold man on a cold night trying to warm up.

It is heartbreaking that Adas Israel Congregation burned to the ground!

AND it is heartbreaking that six Torah scrolls went up in flames!

AND it is heartbreaking that a human being needed to burn garbage in a sukkah to stay warm on a cold night in the wealthiest country in the world.

This is the story of our time.

The story of our time has no neat beginning, no tidy middle, no Hollywood ending.

The story of our time has us.

G'mar Chatima Tovah.

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